CHAPTER 14

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The Post-Romantic Style

Topics

Post-Romanticism
Tonal Instability
Nonfunctional Harmony
Omnibus Progression
Blurred Cadence
Augmented Triads

Important Concepts

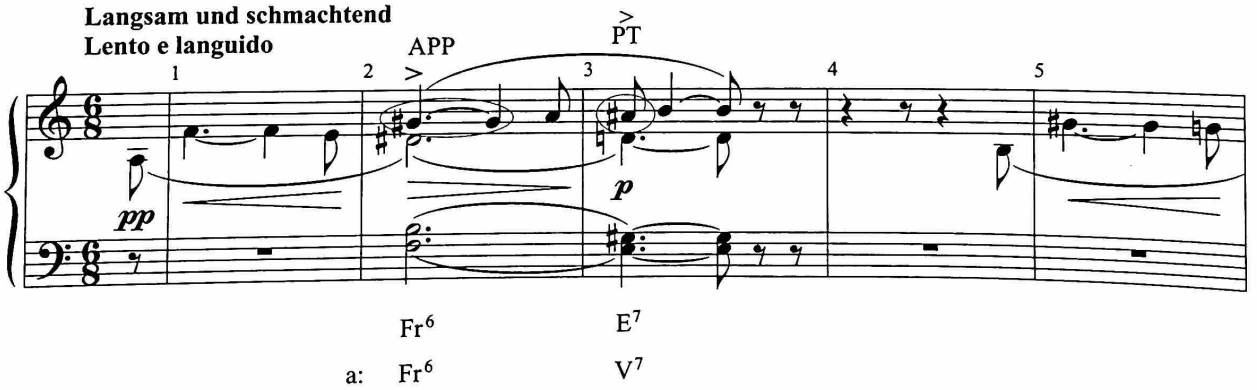
The term *post-romantic* is applied to the music of composers such as Hugo Wolf (1860–1903), Gustave Mahler (1860–1911), and Richard Strauss (1864–1949), who carried the musical style developed by the romantic composers (Richard Wagner in particular) to the outer limits of a tonal system based on the major and minor scales and functional harmony. Although tertian harmony remains an integral part of the harmonic system, *post-romanticism* reflects a compositional style characterized by tonal instability and nonfunctional harmony.

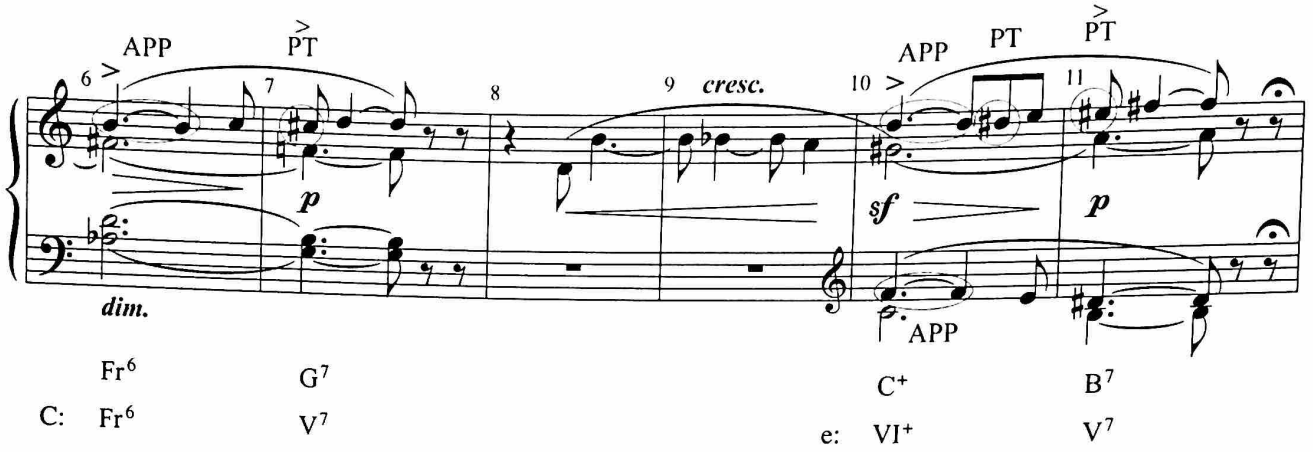
Tonal Instability

The post-romantic composers were greatly influenced by the music of Richard Wagner, who was able to sustain high levels of tension for long periods of time by avoiding resolution of the dominant function. Notice that each dominant 7th in Figure 14.1 is followed by silence and not resolved in the expected way.

Figure 14.1

Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde,* Prelude to act I, mm. 1–11.



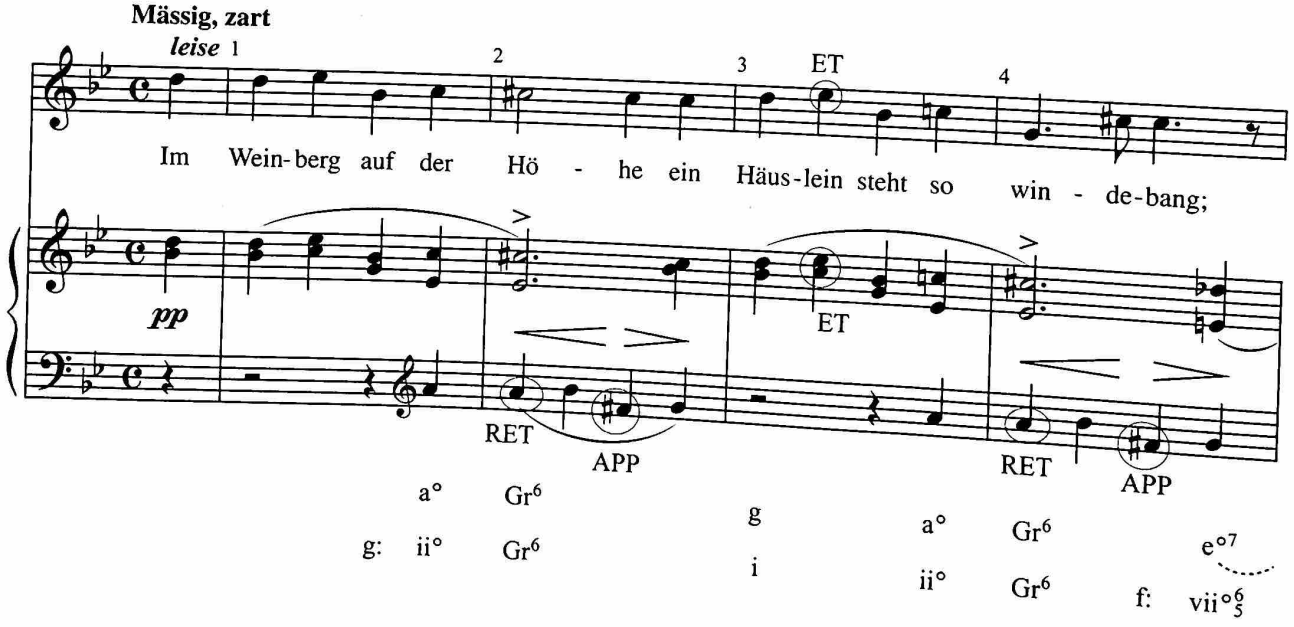


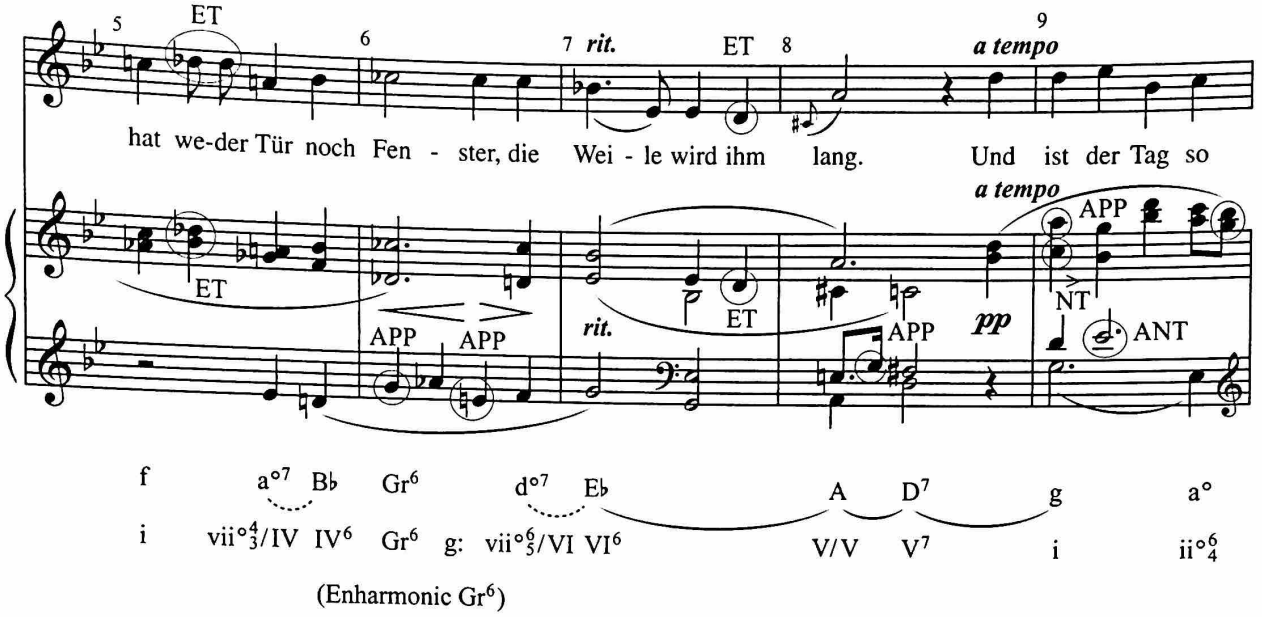
The use of chromatic harmony and nonharmonic tones, plus the absence of the tonic chord, creates tonal instability in this passage. This passage is one of the most discussed and analyzed passages in all Western music, and the analysis just presented is only one possible interpretation.

The following excerpt from a Wolf song (Figure 14.2) creates tonal instability at the outset of the song through thin textures, chromaticism, incomplete chords, and lack of strong moves toward the tonic. The music arrives at a clear tonal center only in measure 9 through a circle progression in the previous measure (V/V–V^7–i), and even here the tonic is somewhat obscured by nonharmonic tones.

Figure 14.2

Wolf: "Der Knabe und das Immlein" ("The Boy and the Bee") from *Gedichte von Eduard Mörike,* mm. 1–9.



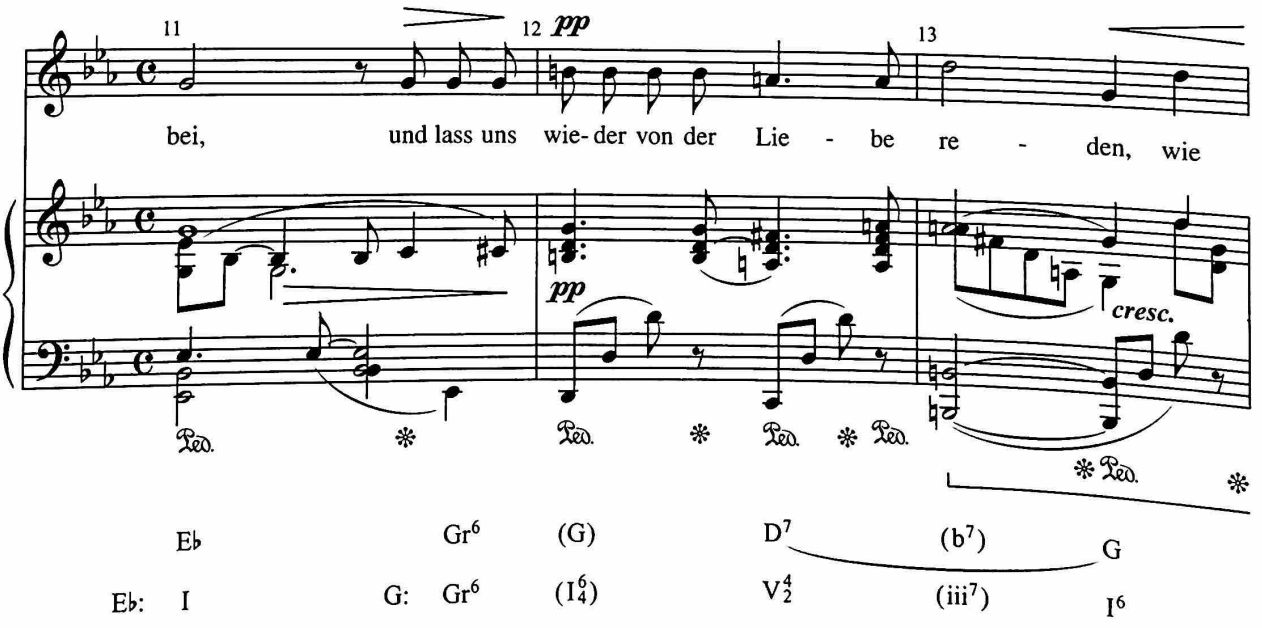


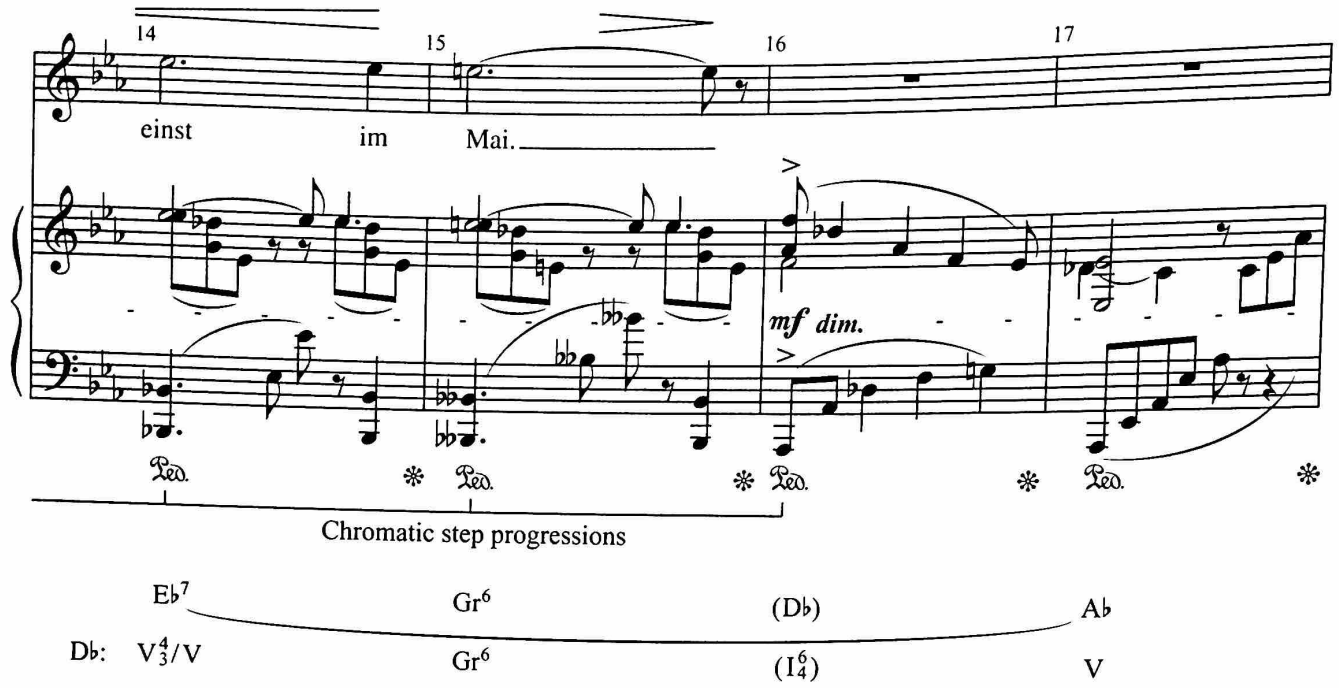
Nonfunctional Harmony

The post-romantic composers often used foreign modulation to create tonal instability. Figure 14.3 is the beginning of a passage that does not return to the tonic for 16 measures. Notice the movement toward G major and D-flat major and the chromatic passage in measures 13 to 15.

Figure 14.3

Strauss: "Allerseelen" ("All Souls Day"), op. 10, no. 8, mm. 11–17.



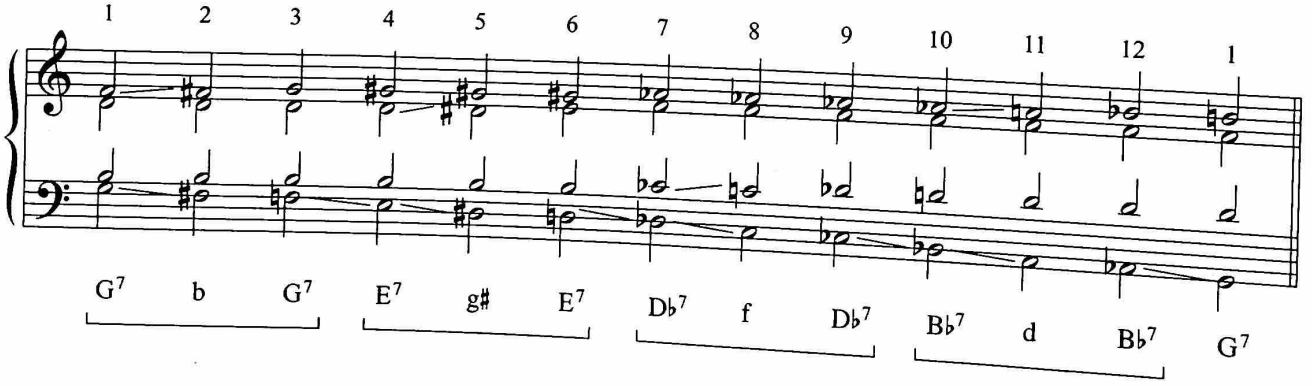


Omnibus Progression

The so-called *omnibus progression* is a specific nonfunctional harmonic progression based on the chromatic scale. In Figure 14.4, notice how the descending chromatic bass line accompanies a sequential harmonic pattern whose repetition divides the octave into four similar parts.

Figure 14.4

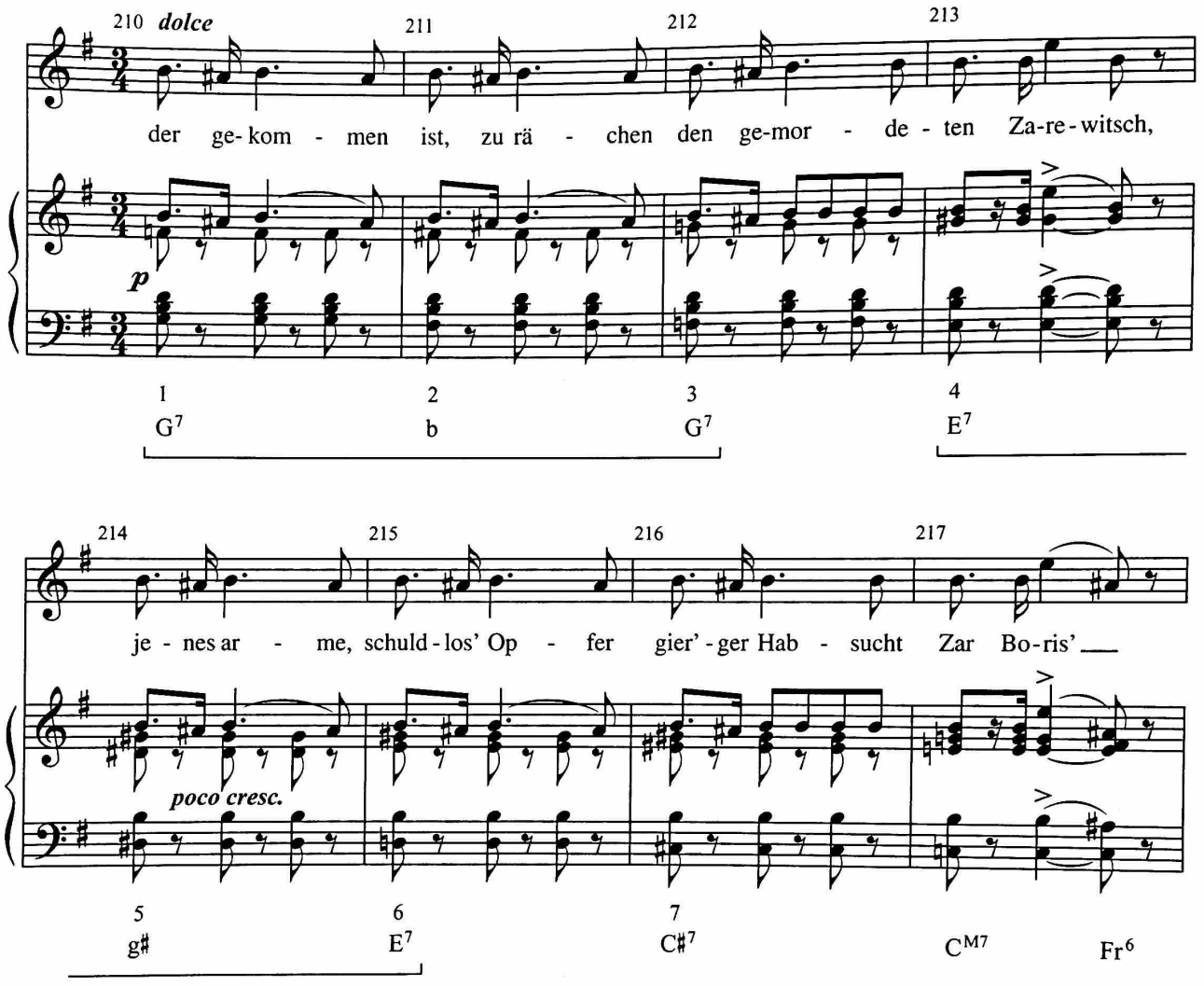
Augmented 6th and 7th chord resolutions



This progression, which occurred occasionally in romantic period music and more frequently in post-romantic music, takes advantage of the dual resolution tendencies of the major-minor 7th chord and the German 6th chord. In chord 1, the minor 7th (G–F) is resolved as an augmented 6th (G–E♯). In chord 3, the F is resolved as the 7th of a chord. At the point of resolution in chord 4, another German 6th/dominant 7th sonority is created, and the process continues until the first chord returns, creating an endless cycle. Figure 14.5 shows a passage from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* that uses seven chords of the omnibus cycle.

Figure 14.5

Mussorgsky: *Boris Godunov,* act III, scene I, mm. 210–217.

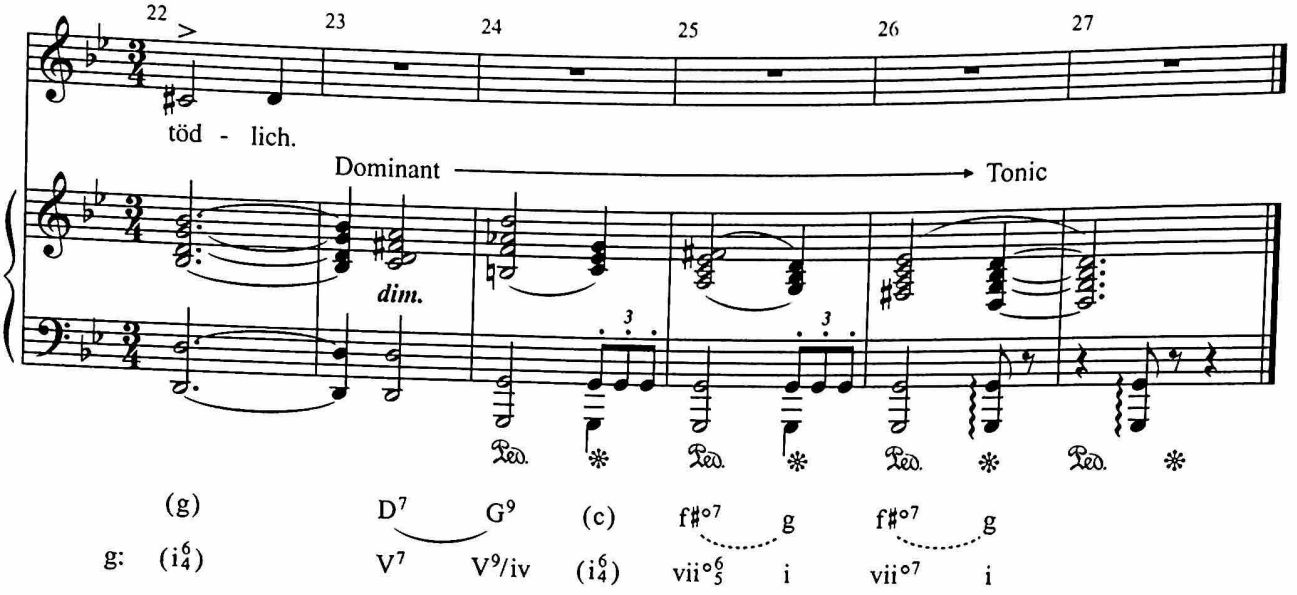


Blurred Cadence

The tonic is sometimes in doubt during most of a composition in this period, but it normally returns at the end to create closure. At the end of a composition, strong cadences are often blurred when other chords (particularly the V/iv) are inserted between the dominant and the tonic chord, as shown in Figure 14.6. The authentic cadence was too simple, following the highly chromatic music earlier in this song.

Figure 14.6

Strauss: "Zeitlose" ("Meadow Saffron"), op. 10, no. 7, mm. 22–27.

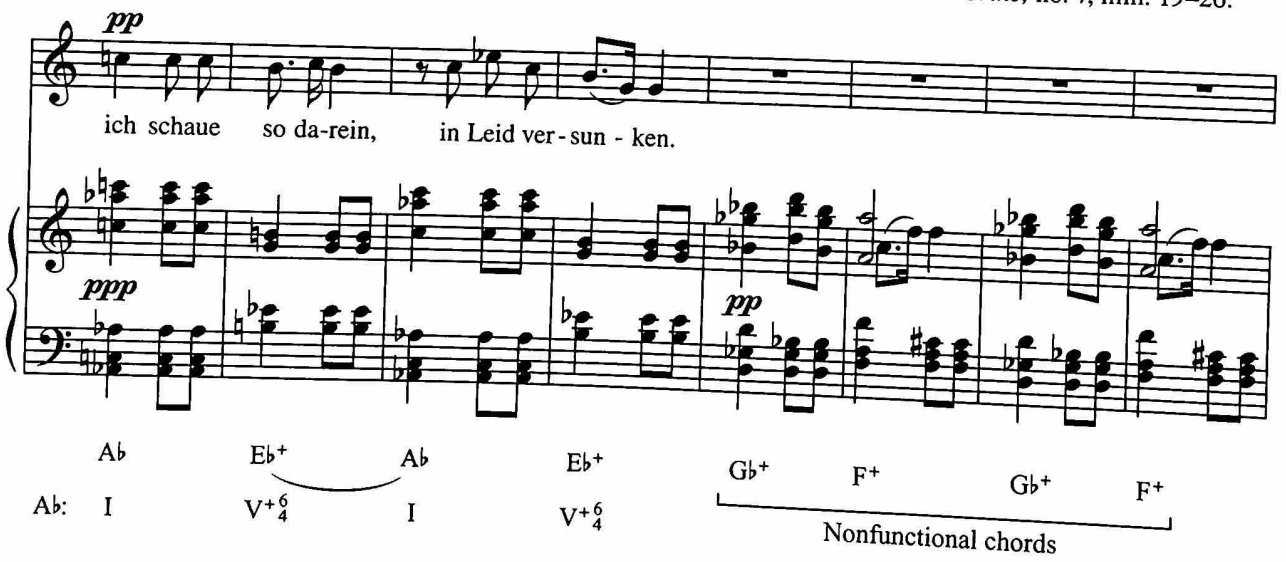


Augmented Triads

The post-romantic composers added the augmented triad to their vocabulary of ambiguous chords. It appeared both as an altered dominant and as a nonfunctional chord. In Figure 14.7, nonfunctional augmented chords are treated with the same sliding chromaticism as the diminished 7th chord in earlier times.

Figure 14.7

Wolf: "Das verlassene Mägdlein" ("The Forsaken Maiden") from *Gedichte von Eduard Mörike,* no. 7, mm. 19–26.



Summary

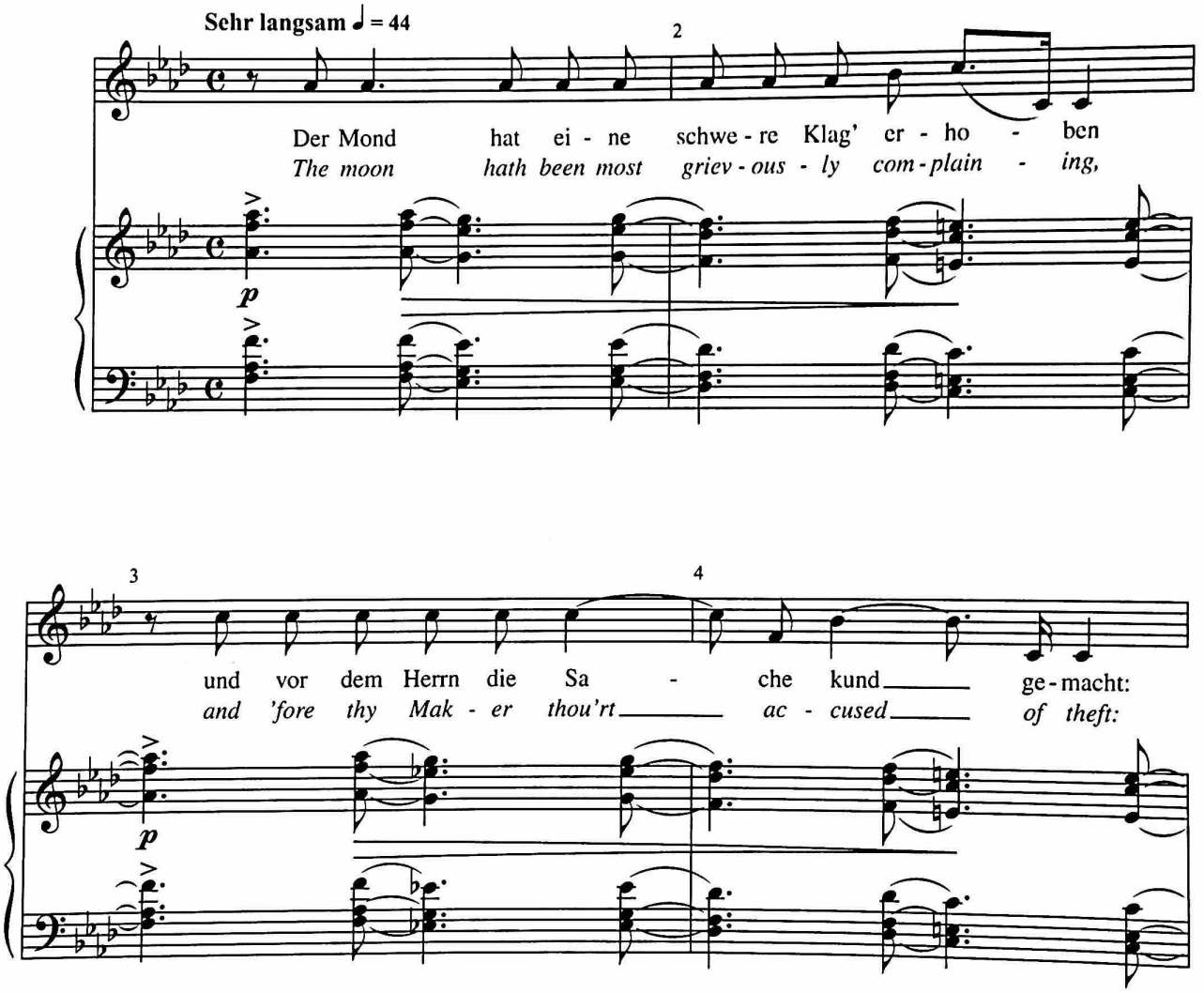
Composers of post-romantic music embraced tertian harmony and utilized the tonal system of major and minor scales, but the style is characterized by tonal instability resulting from chromaticism and delayed resolution. Although analytical systems such as Roman numeral analysis and macro analysis can be applied to compositions from this style period, the frequent key changes, irregular resolutions, chromatic inflections, and enharmonic relationships require a broad-visioned perspective when assessing compositions of this style period.

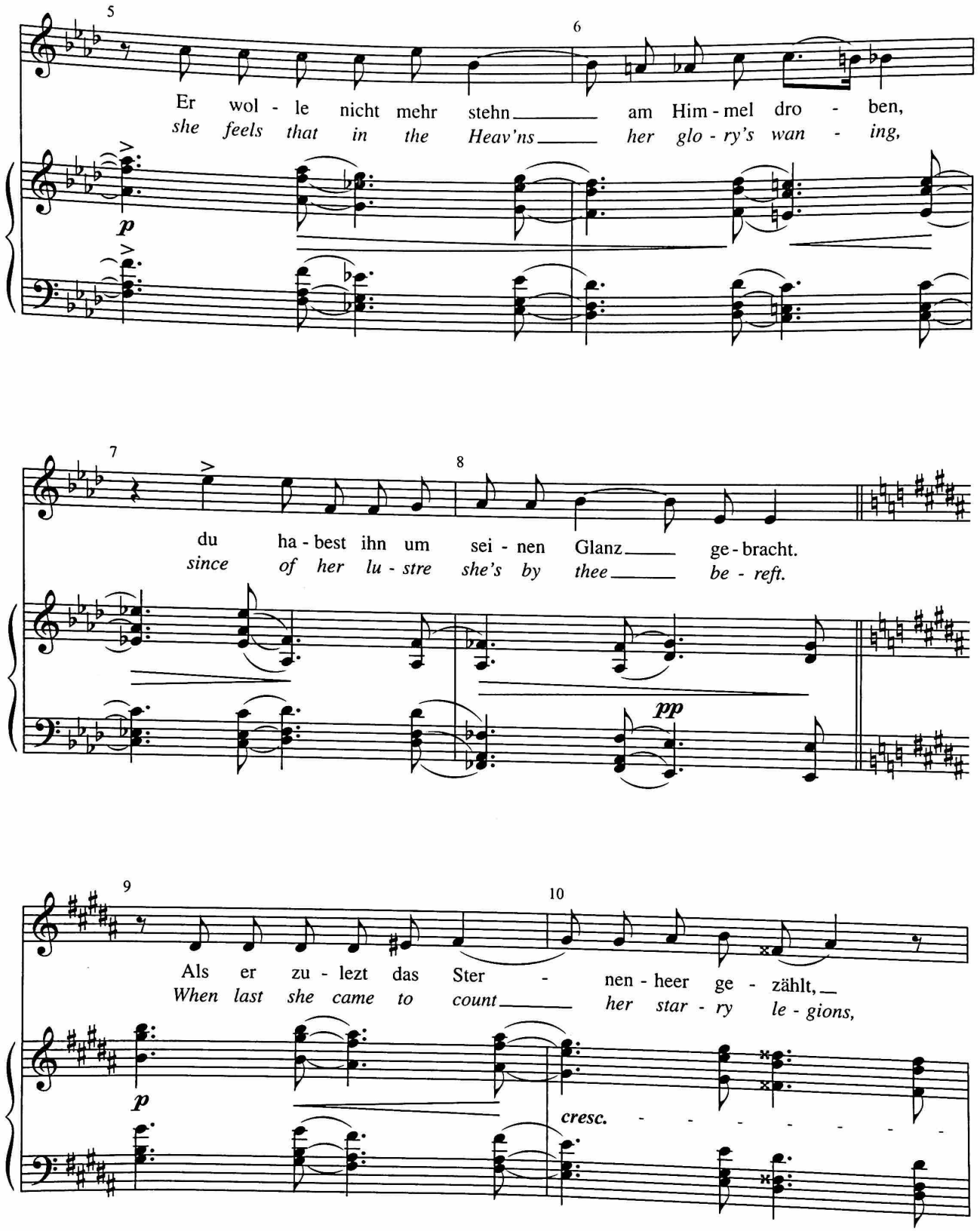
Assignment 14.1

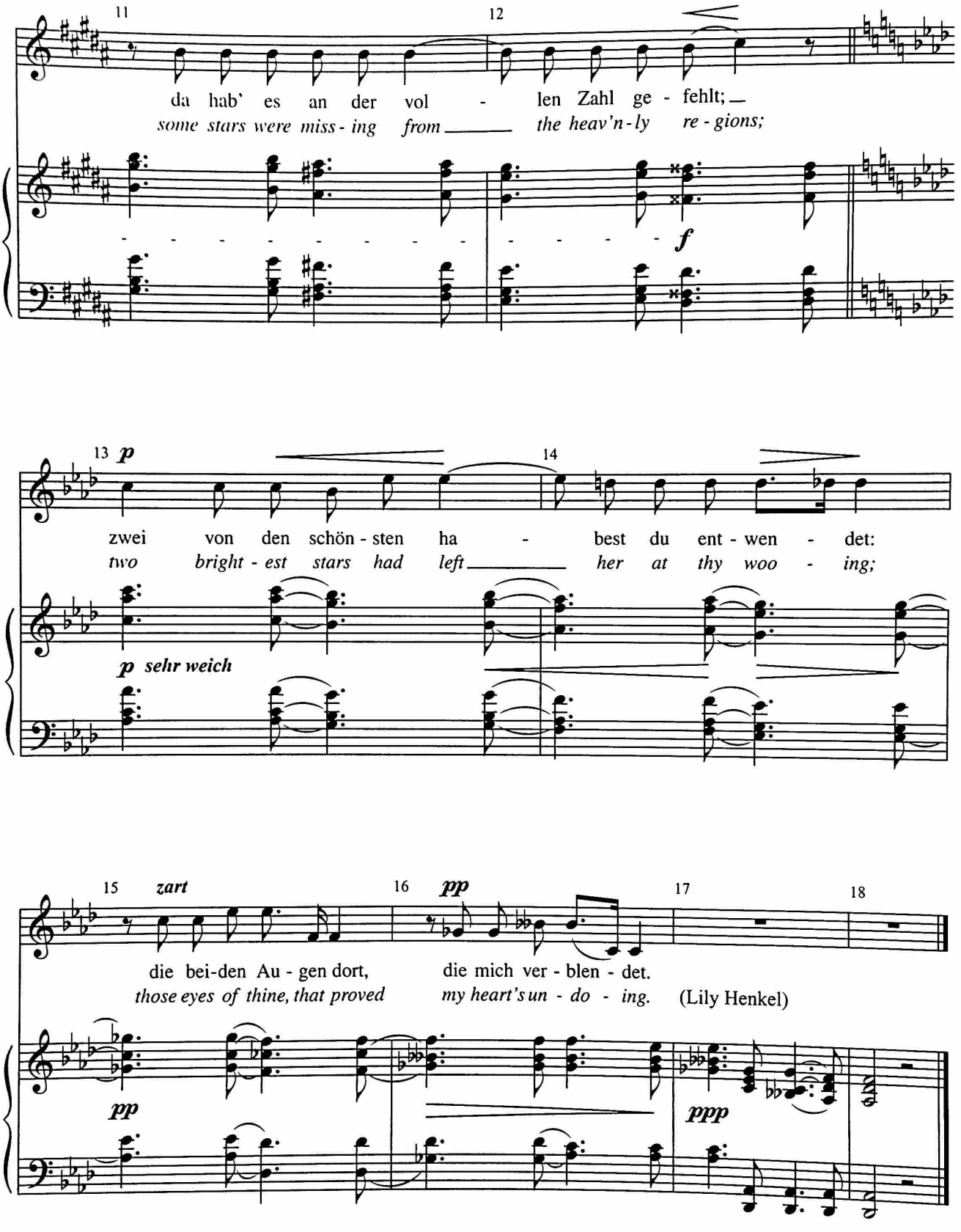
The following song by Hugo Wolf includes nonfunctional harmony and foreign modulations.

1. Prepare a complete analysis (Roman numeral or macro) according to the directions of your instructor.
2. In class or on a separate sheet of paper, discuss the types of harmonic progressions appearing throughout the song. Determine how nonharmonic tones relate to harmonic patterns. Assess the tonal centers and key relationships. Consider how the melody interacts with the framework of the harmony and discuss the impact of the relationship.
3. Before preparing the analysis, have two students perform the song in class or listen to a recording until the work is familiar. (It is fruitless to attempt the analysis of a composition unless you know it thoroughly.)

Wolf: "Der Mond hat eine schwere Klag' erhoben" ("The Moon Hath Been Most Grievously Complaining") from *Italienisches Liederbuch.*




5
6
Er wol - le nicht mehr stehn _____ am Him - mel dro - ben,
she feels that in the Heav'ns _____ her glo - ry's wan - ing,
p
7
8
du ha - best ihn um sei - nen Glanz _____ ge - bracht.
since of her lu - stre she's by thee _____ be - reft.
pp
9
10
Als er zu - lezt das Ster - nen - heer ge - zählt, _
When last she came to count _____ her star - ry le - gions,
p
cresc. - - - - - - - -


11
12
da hab' es an der vol - len Zahl ge - fehlt;
some stars were miss - ing from the heav'n - ly re - gions;
f
13 p
14
zwei von den schön - sten ha - best du ent - wen - det:
two bright - est stars had left her at thy woo - ing;
p sehr weich
15 zart
16 pp
17
18
die bei-den Au - gen dort, die mich ver - blen - det.
those eyes of thine, that proved my heart's un - do - ing. (Lily Henkel)
pp
ppp

Assignment 14.2

Compose a short song in the post-romantic style.

1. Select a short poem you particularly like as the basis for your song.
2. Pattern the harmonic vocabulary after Wolf's "Der Mond hat eine schwere Klag' erhoben" ("The Moon Hath Been Most Grievously Complaining") from *Italienisches Liederbuch*. Use a recurring motivic pattern in the accompaniment.
3. Be sure to include frequent key changes and include modulations to foreign keys.
4. Perform the composition in class with a voice major singing the vocal line.